

IN THE SOCIETY OF FASCISTS

*Acclamation, Acquiescence, and
Agency in Mussolini's Italy*

Edited by
GIULIA ALBANESE
and ROBERTA PERGHER



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Neither Bluff nor Revolution

The Corporations and the Consolidation of the Fascist Regime (1925–1926)

Matteo Pasetti

Bluff or revolution? Since the 1930s assessments of the Fascist regime's corporatist policy have oscillated between these two extremes. From one perspective, proclaimed not only in the slogans of Fascist propaganda but also in the comments of observers around the world, the construction of the corporatist state was described as the very essence of the Blackshirts' revolution. As one noted German economist declared in 1932, Fascist corporatism was nothing less than "the first example of constructive policy in the post-war period[,] . . . a milestone that every other nation concerned about their own political and economic integrity cannot ignore."¹ Corporatism claimed to offer a tool for both the control of labor relations and the suppression of class conflict, as well as a new institutional framework to manage the relationship between politics and the economy. Part of the fascination that Mussolini's regime exercised on observers abroad derived precisely from their interest in corporatist doctrine and the impression that Italy was backing words with deeds, potentially creating a universal remedy for the crisis of liberal society.²

From the opposite perspective, articulated particularly by various anti-Fascist groups, corporatism was seen instead as nothing more than a bluff, a demagogic smokescreen to mask reactionary policies, a "conservative fraud at the expense of the working class."³ According to this perspective, corporatism was all sound and no fury: an endless stream of speeches, proclamations, and promises that in the end produced only an impotent bureaucracy without any legitimate ability to alter social or economic dynamics, whose sole function was to impede the functioning of the labor-management dialectic. Paradoxically, similar criticisms bent on unmasking

the limits of Mussolini's corporatist policies also emerged from within the Fascist movement itself, in the demands or disappointment of those disillusioned by the results the corporatist state had produced after having raised much loftier expectations. If not a bluff, exactly, for those who believed—or had believed—in the Fascist project, corporatism ultimately represented a “failed revolution.”⁴

In the postwar period, debate over the nature of corporatism became the concern of historians, for whom the “bluff thesis” was clearly more persuasive. The predominant interpretation that has emerged insists on the failure of the Fascist corporatist experiment, or at least highlights the gap between the grandeur of the project's ambitions and the modesty of its achievements. But this view also underestimates the historical significance of the experiment itself. To put it bluntly, the “bluff thesis” is an unconvincing oversimplification. As one historian has recently suggested, “it seems overly reductive to dismiss the corporatist experience solely on the basis of its perceived failure.”⁵ Despite the undeniable disparity between their stated objectives and actual results, the policies inspired by corporatism produced effects that cannot be overlooked and were accompanied by profound transformations in the relations between various socioeconomic interests and the state. But the choice between “bluff” and “revolution” itself is also misleading, if one examines corporatism—as the essays in this volume propose—from the broader perspective of the relationship between Fascism and society. The point of this chapter, then, is not to establish the degree of correspondence between claims and facts but rather to investigate if and how Fascist corporatism as a whole—understood as both an ideological discourse and a series of concrete policies developed, enacted, and presented in specific ways—contributed to the establishment and endurance of Mussolini's regime or if it perhaps represented a source of disenchantment or dissent. In other words, the success of Fascist corporatism cannot be measured solely based on how faithfully it fulfilled its own programmatic statements but must also be measured by its ability to garner support for what it was (or was not) in reality. Attention must be shifted from the content of its self-proclaimed doctrine, or the comparison between theory and practice, to the wider reception of debates, projects, and corporatist policies among those outside the Fascist leadership. I will thus examine the attitude of those social actors and groups potentially interested in the development of a corporatist state (business lobbies, the Fascist syndicates, the forces of organized labor, managers and bureaucrats, academics in the areas of legal or economic policy, representatives from the liberal or Catholic worlds) in order to answer the following question: based on the way the corporatist state actually developed—how it

was managed and advertised, the policies it adopted and the results they provided—did corporatism engender forms of acceptance, participation, or loyalty to Fascism?

This essay draws on a sample of very specific sectors of Italian society, which is certainly not exhaustive of the many principals and interlocutors involved in corporatist policy. This sample includes many more or less well-organized social groups that embraced Fascism to some degree, whose boundaries were not always obvious: the entrepreneurial class, or more precisely the captains of industry represented by the *Confederazione Generale dell'Industria Italiana* (General Confederation of Italian Industries, or *Confindustria*); segments of a Catholic world splintered into various political currents, ranging from anti-Fascism to clerico-Fascism; several voices of a liberalism divided between those opposed to the regime and its “fellow-travelers”; and representatives of the legal world with expertise in labor law. These examples provide an inevitably partial and fragmentary picture, but one that may be significant precisely because it is so varied.

This essay will of necessity also focus on a very limited time frame—the span of two short years from 1925 to 1926—for two reasons. First, these two years represented a decisive crossroads in the constitution of the corporatist system and, more generally, the construction of the entire Fascist dictatorship. Within this period, April 3, 1926, represents a key moment: on that date, the Italian parliament approved a new legal framework for collective labor relations after almost a year of preparation. Written by the Justice Minister Alfredo Rocco and supplemented in July with two royal decrees outlining its implementation, the law was portrayed by the regime’s propaganda as the first fundamental pillar of the corporatist edifice. The *legge Rocco* (Rocco law) can be considered a cornerstone of the Fascist state, in that its provisions defined three cardinal rules of union and corporate policy: (1) the authoritarian regulation of labor conflict, through the abolition of the right to strike and lockout, and the creation of the *Magistratura del Lavoro* (Labor Courts); (2) the Fascist monopoly on negotiating representation, through the legal recognition of a sole employer association and a single labor union for every sector; and (3) the creation of the first corporatist bodies, the official meeting places for various socioeconomic interests, through the constitution of the Ministry of Corporations and the National Council of Corporations.⁶

Second, the years 1925–26 represent the last point at which historians can rely on a somewhat independent national media to help measure the range of popular sentiments for the regime. Thereafter, the fascistization of the journalistic trade (through measures that effectively killed freedom of the press in November 1926) leaves historians with a much more limited

set of tools to analyze an already slippery subject—that of public opinion under a dictatorial regime. Here I have tried to exploit the potential offered by an already-limited free press to reflect upon public perceptions of Fascist corporatist policy at the very moment in which it first took shape. Regarding the three primary issues addressed by the *legge Rocco*, each provision represented a precise choice at the expense of other possibilities. In turn, each of these choices provoked different reactions among the various social actors concerned. Trying to comprehend the attitudes of these actors while the government was making these decisions can help us understand the role played by corporatist politics in the construction of a wide range of consensual relationships between the Fascist regime and specific sectors of Italian society.

Addressing corporatism through this case study thus implies a change of perspective with respect to the approach employed by the established historiography. Focusing attention on a specific set of legislative provisions shifts the center of inquiry away from the correlation between the goals and realities of the Fascist corporatist project and toward its reception by particular sectors of society, the construction of compromise and consent, and thus the reciprocal relationship between the Italian public and the regime.

Toward the Authoritarian Regulation of Labor Conflict

In the early months of 1925, while Mussolini's famous speech of January 3 inaugurating the openly dictatorial phase of Fascist rule still reverberated throughout the country, an upsurge of labor unrest drew considerable public attention. Between February and March, a series of strikes over salary claims broke out in a number of iron and steel works, after several union reports revealed that metalworkers were among the hardest hit by the ongoing decline in real wages.⁷ Beginning in Brescia, the wave spread first to Milan, then throughout Lombardy and the other industrial regions of Northern Italy. This was the strongest and most consistent period of labor agitation since the birth of Mussolini's government. But its most revealing aspect was that the strikes had been promoted by the Fascist syndicates under the *Confederazione Nazionale delle Corporazioni Sindacali Fasciste* (National Confederation of Fascist Syndicalist Corporations), led by Edmondo Rossoni.⁸

For the first time since the seizure of power, a part of the Fascist movement appeared to be siding with labor, employing a form of combat that the liberal and conservative press did not hesitate to compare with the traditional methods of the working-class movement. Why, asked the

Corriere della Sera or *Il Giornale d'Italia*, after so many speeches promoting solidarity between the classes, did the Fascist syndicates proclaim a round of strikes without even attempting to bargain? For “essentially political motives,” responded the *Corriere*, “to demonstrate that the Corporations are ready to use extreme means and are not above imitating the union activities of another time and political faith, when it comes to pleasing the workers.”⁹ The Fascist syndicates sought to ride the wave of worker discontent in order to expand and reinforce their own base of support among the shop-floor proletariat, who seemed to be remaining loyal to their old Marxist organizations.¹⁰ According to the official newspaper of the Milanese bourgeoisie—in truth already reduced to little more than a newsletter but still edited by the liberal anti-Fascist Luigi Albertini—the syndicates created a “breakdown in social harmony,”¹¹ a return of social conflict that Fascism had claimed it would suppress but that Fascism itself now nourished. The recourse to a strike was judged to be an “illegal activity,” undertaken for crude political calculations, demonstrating just how illusory the idea of collaboration between opposed socioeconomic interests really was. Not even the Fascist syndicates could dispense with the most basic methods of class struggle.¹² Ultimately, the *Corriere* criticized Fascism for its inability to keep the social peace—that is, for the means it chose to use, rather than the ends it openly pursued. This was a rather ambiguous position for a newspaper that continued to count itself, albeit very cautiously, among the ranks of the opposition.

Italian Catholics who actively supported Mussolini’s government expressed a different, and much less ambiguous, position. *L’Avvenire d’Italia*, the Bolognese daily that since 1923 had espoused an openly pro-Fascist stance, traded polemic barbs with the *Corriere* and other liberal papers, taking aim especially at *Il Giornale d’Italia* and *Il Mondo*. The Catholic paper denied that Fascist syndicalism was staging “the funeral of collaborationism” and a return to class warfare. Rather, it accorded the syndicates the merit of having demonstrated an urgent need for reforms—precisely because they had been unable to give up the strike weapon—in order to provide the state with “new institutions capable of containing the clash of sectarian interests within the limits of the common good.”¹³ After having specified that “collaborationism does not mean suppression, but rather the harnessing of class struggle,” *L’Avvenire* revealed its own interpretation of the ongoing social conflict: by now there could be only two solutions, “one, collaborationist, that starts from the perspective of the common good and aims to move toward national reconciliation of contrasting class interests, and another, classist, that believes one side is destined to succumb and thus exacerbates the struggle to achieve the triumph of one class over the other.” In a handful of articles on the wave of strikes,

the paper encapsulated almost all the arguments in favor of the convergence of interests between Catholics and Fascists: a common aversion to liberal democracy, a fear of Socialism, the idea that social conflict should be controlled from above, and an organic conception of society. Corporatist doctrine made it possible to fuse all these elements together.

Those most concerned by the return of labor conflict, of course, were members of the business class. The sudden change in attitude of the Fascist syndicate appeared a clear provocation at a critical moment in the relationship between the *Confindustria* and the government. Having initially placed their faith in Mussolini's regime and been rewarded with proliberal economic policies in return, the Italian industrialists' organization reacted to the murder of Matteotti with perceptible coolness.¹⁴ In the second half of 1924, publications with ties to the *Confindustria*—like *L'Organizzazione Industriale*, *Il Sole*, or the *Rivista di Politica Economica*—were unsparing in their criticism, at times verging on open dissent. Viewed from this perspective, the attempted show of force by the Confederation of Fascist Syndicalist Corporations did not help bring labor representatives closer together—in the following months, elections for the internal commissions of several factories saw the communist labor organizations emerge victorious—but instead only harmed relations with their managerial counterpart. The elimination of the workers' movement constituted one of the cardinal principles shared by both business and Fascism. According to *Il Giornale d'Italia*, for example, the support of certain social and political groups for the regime “was determined almost exclusively by their belief that it would put an end to strikes and labor agitation.”¹⁵ A few months earlier, a major figure in the electricity business had privately confided the same sentiment; in his diary on December 5, 1924, Ettore Conti had written that it was completely natural that “a thinking and working bourgeoisie, a bourgeoisie that loves family and country, a thrifty bourgeoisie, should turn to support ideas that promised to reestablish the authority of the state, the protection of work, of discipline, of order, and above all of a strong and well-respected country.”¹⁶ This was clearly an oversimplified and self-justifying account, but it contained a kernel of truth: the preservation of order and social hierarchy represented an inextricable element of bourgeois faith in Mussolini's government.

The unrest of March 1925 was thus significant because it appeared to call into question the role ascribed to the Fascist syndicates by segments of the liberal or conservative bourgeoisie, because it made the need for a corporatist turn appear even more urgent in the eyes of philo-Fascist Catholics and because it also seemed to risk rupturing the developing bond between the *Confindustria* and the regime. From each of these

perspectives, the return of social conflict was perceived as a real problem. And the government did not hesitate to respond. On April 25, an order of the Fascist Grand Council established that it was legal to strike only in exceptional cases and only with the prior authorization of the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (National Fascist Party, or PNF).¹⁷ Although Rossoni's confederation was still considered a fundamental part of the Fascist state, this decree created a new level of political and party control over the syndicates. By declaring the defeat of more radical elements within Fascist syndicalism, the decision was intended to reassure all those who feared further social conflicts, first and foremost the business class.¹⁸ In July, while the Finance Minister Alberto De Stefani and Economic Minister Cesare Nava were replaced with men more amenable to the *Confindustria* (Giuseppe Volpi and Giuseppe Belluzzo, respectively), Mussolini dispatched a telegram inviting the prefects to "energetically" conclude any ongoing labor negotiations. The following year, the approval of the *legge Rocco* would severely limit freedom of maneuver in labor negotiations, prohibiting strikes and lockouts and creating a new body, the *Magistratura del Lavoro*, to arbitrate between the two sides. In a climate where social conflict was considered illegitimate, incurring the wrath of even certain segments among the political opposition (including conservative and moderate liberal opinion), the syndicates were deprived of their most effective tool. From this perspective, at least, the advent of Fascist corporatist politics "was anything but a bluff."¹⁹

What is more interesting to note, however, is that in all likelihood this drastic reduction in the syndicates' freedom actually reinforced the acceptance of the regime in various circles. In legal circles, for example, it was met with a chorus of approval. For an eminent Catholic legal scholar such as Francesco Carnelutti (a recognized authority on civil and penal law, at the time a professor at the University of Padova), there could be no "rationale to leave the right to strike or lockout in the hands of professional associations" so long as the state could provide other means to resolve disputes—that is, the workers no longer had any "need to use violence to defend themselves" given that they now enjoyed "the right to seek redress in the courts" through the appointment of a magistrate for that exact purpose.²⁰ On the other hand, as several studies have shown, "the issue of labor strikes, workers' unionization, and social conflict was central to the crisis [of the liberal state] and its resolution."²¹ The distinction between conservative liberalism and authoritarian corporatism was not always so clear cut. This is not meant to suggest that they both consistently followed the same logic but rather to trace lines of continuity between the two schools of thought and emphasize the presence of certain common

ideological strains, beginning with their substantially similar organic concepts of social relations.²²

But the practical details of how to implement these ideas continued to provoke debate, particularly the competencies of the bodies charged with resolving disputes. With regard to the *Magistratura del Lavoro*, for example, one open question prior to the approval of the *legge Rocco* concerned arbitration: should the judgment of the magistrate be obligatory in absolutely all disputes between employers and workers? The *Confindustria* was strongly opposed. In December 1925, its president, Antonio Stefano Benni, replied decisively to Rossoni in a speech before parliament, declaring that in “the multiform and continuously changing conditions of industry” he believed it to be “absolutely impossible” to refer to the labor magistrate in all cases.²³ Among businessmen in the agricultural sector, in contrast, where most had already joined Fascist Party organizations, there were a number of vocal supporters of obligatory state arbitration. Indeed, the idea itself probably had its origins among the *agrari* (agricultural capitalists): it had been a topic of conversation among the large landowners of the Po Valley, in fact, since at least the turn of the century, as a potential response to rural labor strikes.²⁴ The *legge Rocco* contented both factions, making arbitration obligatory for disputes in the agricultural sector, while leaving it optional in the industrial sector.

Toward the Fascist Monopoly on Representation

The second area in which Fascist corporatist policy intervened during the period 1925–26 regarded the question of union representation. In this case, the *legge Rocco* limited itself to providing a legislative veneer over a de facto state of affairs already established by the Palazzo Vidoni Pact of October 2, 1925, in which the *Confindustria* and the Confederation of Fascist Syndicalist Corporations had each recognized their exclusive right to represent business and labor, respectively.²⁵ The regime thus consolidated its monopoly over labor relations (which had already effectively been the case for industry representatives, since the *Confindustria* was the only such organization in existence, but which had not previously existed for labor, divided among various rival unions, including that of the Fascists). These agreements had further limited labor’s freedoms by abolishing factory commissions, which had until then given labor unions a presence on the shop floor. A few months later, the *legge Rocco* of April 3, 1926, set these provisions in stone, conceding legal recognition of workers’ and employers’ right to associate but limiting them to a single association “of secure national loyalty” for each sector, at the discretion of the state and its

organizations. Naturally, the associations chosen were those of the Fascists (including the *Confindustria*, which after December 1925 had appended the term “Fascist” to its official title). Collective bargaining agreements signed by the legally recognized syndicates were valid for all workers in that sector. All other labor organizations were formally excluded, although they could remain in existence as cultural associations. In practice, then, “all of union life was subordinated to the principles and goals of the Fascist state.”²⁶

Still, while the authoritarian regulation of labor conflict was undertaken in a largely favorable climate, the path toward a Fascist monopoly over union representation encountered more substantial resistance from several directions, including even from within the ranks of the Fascist “fellow-travelers,” first and foremost the business class. From the beginning of 1925, in the pages of the *Rivista di Politica Economica* for instance, important figures within the *Confindustria* criticized proposals to introduce obligatory membership in the Fascist syndicates, in the name of a defense of pluralism. At the end of April, in an extraordinary assembly held in Venice after the metalworkers’ strikes and the first government efforts to limit them, president Benni declared that industry was not simply a field for social experiments and reiterated his preference for union pluralism in contrast to “a compulsory and monopolized regime.”²⁷ Again in October, while the *Confindustria* officially denied rumors of internal conflict on the issue and prepared to sign the Palazzo Vidoni Pact that would clear the path for the monopoly of the Fascist syndicates, there were unmistakable signs of discontent within the business world. According to the conjecture of the liberal papers, industrialists in several key sectors—textiles, cotton, electricity, construction—were opposed to such monopoly, while the iron and steel sector seemed more amenable.²⁸ Meanwhile, in an interview with *Il Mondo*, an anonymous Piedmontese industrialist revealed his doubts not about the concept of a Fascist monopoly but rather about the idea of substituting shop-floor factory commissions with factory representatives nominated by the Fascist syndicates from among its own members: while the commissions, the man stated, were a known entity as the elected voice of the workers, “these Fascist fiduciaries that are coming on the horizon represent at once too much and too little”—that is, “too little if one takes stock of the fact that they have no following among the working masses” and “too much because right behind them stands the Fascist Party” and thus the government itself.²⁹

In general, within big-business circles there were two primary critiques of Fascist plans. One, held by what was probably a minority wing of the *Confindustria*, argued that guaranteeing some form of pluralism would be more convenient than entrusting all union representation to the Fascists.

A second more widespread fear was that Fascist factory representatives would introduce political meddling into factory management. It is no coincidence that ultimately the Fascist monopoly, which primarily targeted the working-class movement, was legally recognized, while the introduction of factory representatives was postponed indefinitely and finally instituted only in 1939. While they thus won a monopoly over representation, the Fascist syndicates were deprived of a fundamental tool to create a more direct relationship with labor in the workplace. This oversight in the creation of the corporatist system was not insignificant, as a clearly annoyed Rossoni bitterly noted.³⁰ But it guaranteed that the rigidly authoritarian structure of factory management was preserved—which was, after all, the industrialists' primary concern.³¹

Liberals, meanwhile, were predictably critical, although this issue, too, did not fail to elicit a range of ambiguous and even complimentary views. While the *Corriere della Sera*, in the writings of Luigi Einaudi, distinguished between a "de facto monopoly" and a more controversial "legal monopoly" that he argued would inevitably lead to "the triumph of sectarian selfishness,"³² *Il Giornale d'Italia* was more circumspect.³³ The nation's conservative newspaper of record, which had long assumed a position of prudent alignment with Fascism, continued to edge closer to offering its full support in the name of peace and productivity. Its final concern, if anything, regarded the risk of an excessive concentration of power in the hands of a man like Rossoni—Fascist syndicalism needed to be controlled, to avoid the creation of a "state within the state" and the triumph of "class interests over national interests."³⁴ As has already been noted, this demand would be satisfied within a couple of years with the partition of the Confederation of Fascist Syndicalist Corporations into six distinct organizations at the end of 1928. The authority of Rossoni—feared and reviled in both conservative circles and certain segments of the Fascist Party because of his long history of working-class militancy—would thus be drastically reduced. Whether or not Rossoni and the syndicates truly intended to defend "class interests," as *Il Giornale d'Italia* had feared, the autonomy of Fascist syndicalism was permanently limited without jeopardizing the "modern" character of a dictatorship that had not renounced its goal of "making a police state live side by side with mass political organizations and tools of popular mobilization."³⁵

Stronger and more coordinated opposition to a Fascist union monopoly came, predictably enough, from Marxist labor organizations and Catholic circles. Their motives were similar and equally obvious: keeping the *Confederazione Generale del Lavoro* (General Confederation of Labor, or CGL) alive, in the case of the former, and protecting the *Confederazione Italiana dei Lavoratori* (Italian Workers' Confederation, or CIL) and other

Catholic labor organizations, in the case of the latter.³⁶ Among Catholics, at least initially, such protest was unanimous despite their other political divisions: regarding the signing of the Palazzo Vidoni Pact the entire spectrum of Catholic media opinion, from the anti-Fascist *Il Popolo* to the more neutral *L'Osservatore Romano*, even including the clerico-Fascist *Corriere d'Italia* and *L'Avvenire*, opposed the accords for creating a "sectarian monopoly in the name of the state."³⁷ Between October and November, the heads of various associations (such as the central committee of Catholic Action, the board of the *Istituto Cattolico di Attività Sociali* [Catholic Institute for Social Activities], and the executive committee of the CIL) each released statements reiterating more or less the same idea: that Catholics were absolutely in favor of the creation of a corporatist order that encouraged reconciliation of interests and social peace but that it was necessary to also guarantee a degree of pluralism—that is, to permit the coexistence of unions with different political orientations in all sectors, each with the same right to legal recognition.³⁸ During parliamentary debates on the proposed law outlining the legal framework for collective bargaining and labor relations, a further element of discord emerged regarding the prohibition of unionization for public employees, later enacted by Rocco's plan.³⁹ Despite these differences, after the approval of the *legge Rocco* the Catholic associations authorized their members to enter the Fascist syndicates and ended up accepting Fascist corporatist policies.

Why? There are several plausible reasons: fundamental ideological sympathies, the common defense of class interests, and a conviction that they could work to influence labor relations from within the system or, to the contrary, a recognition of their undeniable weakness in the face of Fascist pretensions to hegemony. Whatever the root causes, the decision to accept corporatist policy prevailed over the preservation of Catholics' own autonomy. This was amply demonstrated in a speech by Luigi Colombo, the president of Catholic Action: even if "this system does not fully correspond with the Catholic social program," he declared in May 1926, "the importance of contemporary historical events is in every way extraordinary," and "it is thus the duty of all Catholics not to disobey the new law" but rather to meet "the call for collaboration from the working and managerial classes."⁴⁰ Naturally, not all Catholics responded to his appeal. Within Catholic labor organizations, after the dissolution of the CIL at the end of 1926, certain groups linked with the tradition of social Catholicism chose the path of the anti-Fascist struggle. But the majority, while avoiding a slide toward the more extremist positions of clerico-Fascism, chose the option of a basic compromise with the regime.

Having resolved the most controversial issue—namely, the concession of a Fascist monopoly—the reform of union representation enacted

between 1925 and 1926 was subsequently accepted, approved, underwritten, and at times even hailed with real satisfaction by various social groups, while it was endured, with mute resignation, by the working classes. Even among the leaders of the opposition unions that originated in the Socialist camp, there was a surprising diversity of reactions: while the majority of the leaders of the CGL aligned themselves with anti-Fascism, dissolving their organization and choosing the path of exile or the underground, a minority demonstrated interest in the new legal standards for labor relations and declared themselves ready to contribute their constructive criticism to the Fascist experiment. This was most notably the case for the group of old labor activists led by Rinaldo Rigola, who in 1927 founded the *Associazione Nazionale di Studi "Problemi del Lavoro"* (National Association for the Study of Labor Issues). Among the innovations introduced by Rocco, two, in their view, carried particular promise: the institution of the *Magistratura del Lavoro* and the imposition of the "single legal union," which they deemed "progress over the plurality of unions," even if it was in the hands of the Fascists.⁴¹

Toward New Corporatist Organizations

Three months after parliament approved the labor law, on July 1–2, two royal decrees officially completed the regulations designed by Rocco and instituted two new organizations: the Ministry of Corporations and the National Council of Corporations. In theory, the creation of these two new bodies should have opened a more authentically corporatist phase in the politics of the regime and marked a passage from the achievement of one goal to the pursuit of another, even more ambitious objective. Having regulated labor relations by authoritarian means and essentially suppressed the right to unionize, many believed it was now time to begin building an institutional network capable of managing the economic life of the country, principally through the introduction of a new model of mediation between the interests of social groups and the state. Yet this second phase opened in a rather cautious fashion, with a significant reduction in aims, especially since the Council of Corporations existed only on paper until 1930, and the new ministry did not oversee any genuine corporations until 1934.

The established historiography that has viewed the corporatist experiment through the interpretive lens of "bluff" or outright failure has already highlighted how, after the labor law, "neither employers nor workers had any direct or immediate interest in the creation of the corporations; indeed, their future existence was viewed by both sides with suspicion, out of fear

that such bodies would tip the balance against them with respect to the precarious equilibrium reached in the 1926 legislation.”⁴² In fact, beyond simply reconciling class interests, the corporations could have also assumed the power to influence national economic policy (by absorbing functions previously assumed by parliament, for example) or intervene in issues regarding the organization of production (by adjudicating the “appropriate” number of employees in a given workplace, for instance). But this path would have entailed wresting such authority from those who had held it since the advent of capitalism—that is to say, from employers themselves. A number of sources suggest that the *Confindustria* desired control over labor relations, or more precisely the elimination of labor conflict, but at the same time firmly opposed the creation of a powerful and potentially intrusive corporatist apparatus and thus objected to the extension of corporatist principles from labor relations to production. With respect to policies concerning management and business organization, the *Confindustria* remained firmly in favor of its own hierarchy. The paradigmatic and most often cited example is that of Benni’s March 30, 1926, speech to the Grand Council. Drawing on the reigning ideology of productivity, then widely accepted in all its various declinations,⁴³ the president of the *Confindustria* declared the factory to be “a technical state in miniature” that should be governed by applying “the same principles of authority that govern a state.” In Benni’s view, the failure of the “constitutional factory” was as evident as the failure of the parliamentary state. In the management of a productive system, the “interference of outside powers” was not permissible, because only a rigid “technical hierarchy” could guarantee the functioning of the entire system to the advantage of the whole community. The preservation of an authoritarian model of business organization, to Benni, thus corresponded perfectly with the “Fascist concept” of society.⁴⁴

In Benni’s words one can see the roots of a demythologized view of the corporatist state: not the ideology of the “third way”—the synthesis and surpassing of both capitalism and Socialism—but rather a simple correction of capitalism, aimed primarily at ending social conflict. This was the vision prevalent among the Italian industrial leadership, shared by exceptionally prominent figures like the CEO of the *Confindustria*, Gino Olivetti, among others. For at least the second half of the 1920s, the practical application of the Fascist corporatist system diverged very little from this path.⁴⁵ The attitude of the *Confindustria* toward corporatist policy was thus more than just a strategy of self-defense to “salvage the salvageable”—that is, to preserve its limited sphere of influence—an interpretation that appears in many protagonists’ memoirs and was later given validity by some historians.⁴⁶ Rather, industrialists succeeded in actively influencing Fascist policy, beginning by reconciling their concrete interests with their ideological

positions. In the end, “they were not strong enough to dominate Fascism but [they] were sufficiently influential to thwart the plans of self-styled Fascist social revolutionaries.”⁴⁷

Among the Fascist movement’s many overlapping identities (revolutionary, corporatist, repressive, nationalist, racist, totalitarian), the most consonant with the views of the heads of the *Confindustria*—and, by extension, a large part of the Italian business class—was its authoritarian guise, bent on the conservation or restoration of a social and economic order based on traditional class hierarchies. This guise possessed several features that conflicted with others—its corporatist or totalitarian facades, for instance—that hoped to fulfill visions that cut across class lines. The complex balancing act the regime was required to perform in order to keep this schizophrenia in check, or more precisely its need to privilege one faction or group of supporters over others, decisively shaped its internal structure and the way it mediated between various social groups. As a consequence, the regime would be forced to sacrifice some of the most ambitious elements of the corporatist project, abandoning any pretense of fundamentally altering the political and economic order. But Italy’s industrial leaders were not the only reason the regime failed to make much headway in this direction.

Indeed, in the years 1925–26 Fascism itself was anything but prepared to construct a fully corporatist institutional edifice. The program of the PNF was uncoordinated and vague, rich with suggestions but devoid of concrete initiatives. Notwithstanding its long gestation, ideological debate on corporatism was still rather confused (and would largely remain so until the regime’s end). Corporatist policy, therefore, emerged in piecemeal fashion from Rocco’s legislative efforts, clearly aimed at transforming his idea of a “strong state” into reality, and from the continuous interplay of alliances and clashes both between the various faces of Fascism and between Fascism and the social groups most affected by the proposals under consideration. As a result, to put it simply, the legislation undergirding the corporatist state ultimately dealt with labor relations more than its institutional framework. Regarding the latter, in these two years the most concrete plans remained those of the majority report prepared midway through 1925 by Gino Arias, in his role as member of the *Commissione per lo Studio delle Riforme Istituzionali* (Commission for the Study of Institutional Reforms, also known as the “Commission of Eighteen” or the “Commission of the Solons”). The commission itself, however, offers evidence of the profound divisions that existed on this issue; at the end of its labors, this small group presented not just one but three separate reports (in addition to that of Arias, a second was prepared by Francesco Coppola, Niccolò Melodia, Matteo Mazziotti, and Fulvio Suvich, and a

third by Corrado Gini). In any event, although they provoked brief public debate, the proposals outlined in that forum would ultimately come to nothing.⁴⁸

Reform of the mechanisms of political representation, which for Arias were to be resolved by assigning corporatist bodies the task of electing one half of the *Camera dei Deputati* (House of Representatives) did draw the attention of anti-Fascists among the deeply divided Catholics at the conclusion the fifth and final congress of the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (Italian People's Party, or PPI) in June 1925. In a statement prepared by Giovanni Gronchi (former undersecretary in the Ministry of Industry under Mussolini before the break between the Catholic Party and Fascism in April 1923), the party acknowledged that the Fascist corporatist program could be reconciled "in its formal outlines" with the principles of Catholic social dogma. Nevertheless, it disapproved of "every pretense of the state to regulate national labor and productivity" and declared itself "clearly opposed" to the presence of the corporations in the *Camera* as proposed by Arias, "judging it to be a deformation of the political character of the parliamentary assembly and a diminishment of universal suffrage." As an alternative, the party proposed "the constitution of high-level technical councils for the various branches of public service" to be endowed with legislative powers and an electoral reform of the *Senato* (Senate) to give greater "representation to constitutionally created bodies and to the various classes."⁴⁹ Skepticism about the work of the commission was rife not only within the PPI but also among the clerico-Fascist wing of the Catholic movement: while the convergence of interests between Fascist corporatism and Catholic integralism was constantly reaffirmed, the reforms proposed by the "*Solons*" attracted few sympathizers.⁵⁰

Reservations about proposals to alter the mechanisms of political representation to create a fully corporatist state, with the ultimate goal of fusing the spheres of politics and economics, existed even in circles where there was widespread agreement upon basic corporatist principles. At least until the economic crisis of the 1930s revived the myth of the corporatist "third way," the results of the Fascist corporatist policies laid out by the *legge Rocco* appeared more than sufficient to broad segments of the Fascist hierarchy as well as to many of its important external interlocutors. Within the legal world, for example, the legislation of 1926 was recognized as an expedient marriage of declared goals, prescribed norms, and practical results—an embodiment of the widely accepted need for social peace maintained under the guidance of the state. For figures like the jurist Carnelutti, the corporatist "revolution" ended there, with an act of reassurance destined to restore stability to a country gripped by fear of class warfare and distrustful of parliamentary democracy as a means to keep

social disorder under control.⁵¹ But to those legal scholars more attentive to the totalitarian turn in 1926—men like Giorgio Del Vecchio, Antonio Navarra, Alberto Asquini, Giuliano Mazzoni, all distinguished university professors—the new legislation did not fit “within the margins of a healthy restoration of the state’s authority, a restoration imposed by circumstance and rigorously limited to the field of labor and union relations.”⁵² Viewed from this perspective, “the law of ’26, and specifically the image of corporatism that it appeared to promote, deserved merit for its exhaustiveness, for the definitive solution of the union issue” rather than for inaugurating a new era in the relationship between politics and the economy.⁵³ As late as 1949, notwithstanding the disrepute into which Fascist corporatist illusions had fallen after the catastrophic collapse of the regime, some Catholic legal scholars—among them the indefatigable Carnelutti—would continue to define the strike weapon as “an act of war” and to consider the *legge Rocco* to have been “a good law.”⁵⁴

A Balance Sheet

On the basis of these considerations, what conclusions can we draw regarding our initial question: Did the very partial implementation of corporatism (“*le approssimazioni corporative*”)⁵⁵ of the years 1925–26 contribute to the consolidation of support for Fascism, and if so, under what terms?

1. Taken as a whole, the *legge Rocco* received widespread approval both for the reforms it introduced and for those it avoided or fulfilled only incompletely. Neither bluff nor revolution, at least in this initial phase, corporatist policy was attractive for more than one reason: it responded to the demands for social pacification common to different sectors of the Italian bourgeoisie; it aided in the construction of a “strong” and at the same time “modern” state, according to the shared ideological traditions of the managerial elite; it guaranteed the preservation of established hierarchies in an economically productive system and caused only minimal damage to the interests of the business and industrial classes; and it postponed indefinitely (without ever fully abandoning publicly) more radical solutions that were only supported by a small radical fringe of the Fascist movement.
2. The advent of the corporatist state represented a factor of primary significance in the revival of the Fascist regime after the difficulties it encountered in 1924. Obviously, its proclamation was only one piece of a more complex mosaic. Nevertheless, the conditions that allowed Mussolini’s government to overcome this impasse rested on

the opposition's profound political crisis, on the one hand, and on the tenacity of those sociopolitical alliances that had allowed Fascism to come to power, on the other.⁵⁶ The labor reform succeeded because it worked precisely in both directions: it rendered any alternative to Fascist organizations in labor relations impossible; it demonstrated once more the contradictions underlying liberal political culture; it reinforced its ties with the amenable factions of the Catholic world; it gave legitimacy to Fascist corporatism (thanks also in part to the endorsement of academic and legal opinion); and above all, it brought the regime closer together with the nation's industrial leaders after a period of tension and before a series of new controversial economic provisions (such as its deflationary policies and the monetary revaluation of the so-called *quota 90*).

3. The corporatist order of 1926 was the result of an authoritarian compromise, but it still involved a degree of confrontation between the regime and powerful social forces. In certain respects, the process by which this compromise was reached did not differ substantially from that of other European countries in the mid-1920s.⁵⁷ But in Italy, as in the rest of Europe, the stability it produced was only temporary. In the coming years, in fact, the corporatist compromise would be continually questioned and renegotiated. Still, what made the Italian case unique was the content of the reforms from 1925 to 1926, which created a vicious cycle. By reinforcing the dictatorship, the compromise would in fact end up promoting the regime's hegemonic ambitions, thus allowing Fascism to concentrate authority in its own hands at the expense of those political, economic, and social powers that were the foundation of its success. These powers, in contrast, would find their margins for autonomy and maneuver progressively restricted. For the regime, which gradually absorbed parts of these groups, the problem of consent would increasingly become a question requiring resolution within Fascism itself. Tellingly, Antonio Gramsci intuited this phenomenon in 1926, as he observed the daily unfolding of events: "It will be within the breast of Fascism itself that conflicts will tend to arise, since they cannot appear in any other way."⁵⁸

Notes

1. The statement was that of Werner Sombart, pronounced in remarks at an international conference held in Rome in November 1932, later translated and published in *Universalità del fascismo: Raccolta di giudizi di personalità*

- e della stampa di tutto il mondo 1922–1932*, ed. Eugenio Coselschi (Florence: Vallecchi, 1933), 343.
2. See Gianpasquale Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista: Il mito del corporativismo* (Rome: Carocci, 2006), 181–83.
 3. Carlo Rosselli, “Corporazione e rivoluzione,” *Quaderno 10 di Giustizia e Libertà*, February 1934, 12.
 4. Camillo Pellizzi, *Una rivoluzione mancata* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2009). Regarding such criticism from within the Fascist movement itself, see Silvio Lanaro, “Appunti sul fascismo ‘di sinistra’: La dottrina corporativa di Ugo Spirito,” in *Il regime fascista*, ed. Alberto Aquarone and Maurizio Vernassa (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1974), 357–88; and Giuseppe Parlato, *La sinistra fascista: Storia di un progetto mancato* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2000).
 5. Alessio Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 2010), 117.
 6. See the text of the laws of April 3, 1926 and the *decreti legge* of July 1–2, 1926 in Alberto Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario* (1965; repr., Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 442–54.
 7. See Nicola Cilla, *Effetti economici del fascismo* (Milan: Società Editrice “l’Unità,” 1925).
 8. For a detailed reconstruction of the negotiations, which concluded with the partial satisfaction of labor’s demands, see Ferdinando Cordova, *Le origini dei sindacati fascisti: 1918–1926* (Rome: Laterza, 1974), 357–88. The principal organizer of the strikes was the Fascist leader from Brescia, Augusto Turati.
 9. “Il significato d’un episodio,” *Corriere della Sera*, March 20, 1925.
 10. See Alberto De Bernardi, *Operai e nazione: Sindacati, operai e Stato nell’Italia fascista* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1993), 57–60.
 11. “Armonie e disarmonie,” *Corriere della Sera*, March 13, 1925.
 12. “La lotta e i suoi metodi,” *Corriere della Sera*, March 14, 1925.
 13. “Le trattative per la composizione dello sciopero metallurgico saranno continuate domani a Milano,” *L’Avvenire d’Italia*, March 15, 1925. See also “Le ripercussioni polemiche degli accordi di Milano e la situazione politica,” *L’Avvenire d’Italia*, March 17, 1925; and “I colloqui dell’on. Mussolini sui lavori parlamentari,” *L’Avvenire d’Italia*, March 18, 1925. During this same period very similar arguments appeared in the pages of *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican’s newspaper of record.
 14. On this periodization, the historiography on the relationship between the *Confindustria* and Fascism is largely in agreement. See, among others, Mario Abrate, *La lotta sindacale nella industrializzazione in Italia: 1906–1926* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1967); Piero Melograni, *Gli industriali e Mussolini: Rapporti tra Confindustria e fascismo dal 1919 al 1929* (Milan: Longanesi, 1972); Roland Sarti, *Fascism and Industrial Leadership in Italy 1919–1940: A Study of the Expansion of Private Power under Fascism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); and Franklin Hugh Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism: The Political Development of the Industrial Bourgeoisie, 1906–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
 15. “Che cosa faranno gli industriali?,” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, March 14, 1925.

16. Ettore Conti, *Dal taccuino di un borghese* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986), 214. Similar notes can be found in the diaries or memoirs of other major figures in Italian economic life: See, for example, Felice Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche fra le due guerre* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988), 238.
17. The text of the *ordine del giorno* was later reprinted in Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, 437–38.
18. See Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, 120; and Cordova, *Le origini dei sindacati fascisti*, 400–402.
19. Santomassimo, *La terza via fascista*, 18.
20. Francesco Carnelutti, *Teoria del regolamento collettivo dei rapporti di lavoro: Lezioni di diritto industriale* (Padova: Cedam, 1927), 67–68.
21. Gian Carlo Jocteau, *L'armonia perturbata: Classi dirigenti e percezione degli scioperi nell'Italia liberale* (Rome: Laterza, 1988), 221.
22. Jocteau, *L'armonia perturbata*, 221–27. Beyond Jocteau, see esp. Lanaro, *Nazi-one e lavoro: Saggio sulla cultura borghese in Italia, 1870–1925* (Venice: Marsilio, 1979).
23. “Il sindacalismo dello Stato fascista e gli industriali nei discorsi di Farinacci, Rossoni e Benni alla Camera,” *La Stampa*, December 10–11, 1925.
24. See Francesco Coletti, *Economia rurale e politica rurale in Italia: Raccolta di studi* (Piacenza: Federazione Italiana dei Consorzi Agrari, 1926), 113–25.
25. See the text of the pact in Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, 439.
26. Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista*, 35.
27. “L’assemblea della Confederazione Generale dell’Industria Italiana,” in *L’Organizzazione Industriale*, May 1, 1925.
28. See “Tra industriali e Conf. del lavoro,” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, October 1, 1925; and “I rapporti fra industriali e sindacati fascisti,” *Corriere della Sera*, October 2, 1925.
29. “Nostra intervista con un industriale piemontese,” *Il Mondo*, October 3, 1925.
30. See, for instance, “Adunata sindacale a Torino: Un discorso dell’on. Rossoni,” *Corriere della Sera*, January 18, 1926.
31. See Adrian Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power: Fascism in Italy, 1919–1929* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 318–20.
32. Luigi Einaudi, “Monopoli di fatto e monopoli legali,” *Corriere della Sera*, October 1, 1925 (reprinted in Einaudi, *Cronache economiche e politiche*, 496–500).
33. “Gli industriali riconoscono nelle corporazioni la sola rappresentanza operaia,” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, October 6, 1925.
34. “Disciplina nello Stato,” *Il Giornale d’Italia*, May 14, 1926.
35. De Bernardi, *Una dittatura moderna: Il fascismo come problema storico* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2001), 220. Regarding Rossoni, who from pre-war revolutionary syndicalism moved toward national-syndicalism during the First World War before finally helping create Fascist syndicalism and its organizations, see Matteo Pasetti, *Tra classe e nazione: Rappresentazioni e organizzazione del movimento nazional-sindacalista (1918–1922)* (Rome: Carocci, 2008).

36. See, for example, "Perché confederali e cattolici sono contrari al monopolio sindacale," *Il Mondo*, September 26, 1925.
37. "Il nuovo patto sindacale tra le Corporazioni e la Confederazione dell'industria," *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, October 6, 1925.
38. The statements released by the Catholic associations can be found in Luisa Riva Sanseverino, *Il movimento sindacale cristiano dal 1850 al 1939* (Rome: Zuffi, 1950), 381–83.
39. See Giorgio Candeloro, *Il movimento cattolico in Italia* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982), 490–91.
40. The speech was reprinted in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 16, 1926.
41. R[inaldo] R[igola], "Punti fermi," *Problemi del Lavoro*, March 25, 1927. Regarding the *Associazione*, see Cordova, *Verso lo Stato totalitario: Sindacati, società e fascismo* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005), 107–61.
42. Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, 138.
43. See Charles S. Maier, "The Factory as Society: Ideologies of Industrial Management in the Twentieth Century," in *Ideas into Politics: Aspects of European History 1880–1950*, ed. Roger J. Bullen, Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann, and Antony B. Polonsky (London: Croom Helm, 1984).
44. The quotes from Benni's speech are taken from Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism*, 367; and Lyttelton, *The Seizure of Power*, 321.
45. See Jocteau, "Gino Olivetti: La Confindustria e il corporativismo. Il ruolo dell'ideologia nel sindacalismo padronale italiano," *Annali di storia dell'impresa* 8 (1992): 365–70.
46. Among first-person accounts, see esp. Guarneri, *Battaglie economiche fra le due guerre*, 148–54. Among historians, this argument has been put forward most recently in Adler, *Italian Industrialists from Liberalism to Fascism*, 381–86.
47. Sarti, *Fascism and Industrial Leadership in Italy*, 137–38.
48. See Aquarone, *L'organizzazione dello Stato totalitario*, 53–60; Cordova, *Le origini dei sindacati fascisti*, 417–21; and Gagliardi, *Il corporativismo fascista*, 29–33. The Arias and Gini reports were published in July 1925 in the volume *Relazioni e proposte della commissione presidenziale per lo studio delle riforme costituzionali* (Rome: Provveditoriato Generale dello Stato, 1925) [a later reprinting was issued by the Florentine publisher Le Monnier, 1932]; the second report was never published.
49. The text of the *ordine del giorno* by Gronchi is cited in Stefano Jacini, *Storia del Partito popolare italiano* (Milan: Garzanti, 1951), 327.
50. See, for example, "Intransigenza politica e orientamenti sindacali," *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, September 29, 1925; and "Le Corporazioni e la riforma politica dello Stato: Dal progetto dei Soloni a quello del Presidente," *L'Avvenire d'Italia*, October 7, 1925.
51. See Umberto Romagnoli, *Il lavoro in Italia: Un giurista racconta* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 102–3.
52. Irene Stolzi, *L'ordine corporativo: Poteri organizzati e organizzazione del potere nella riflessione giuridica dell'Italia fascista* (Milan: Giuffrè, 2007), 3.
53. *Ibid.*, 43.

54. See Federico Mancini, "I cattolici, il corporativismo e la democrazia," *Il Mulino* 18 (April 1953): 167–76. The author cites the results of a congress of the *Unione dei Giuristi Cattolici* held in Rome November 4–6, 1949.
55. Salvatore Lupo, *Il fascismo: La politica in un regime totalitario* (Rome: Donzelli, 2000), 217.
56. See Renzo De Felice, *Mussolini il fascista: L'organizzazione dello Stato fascista 1925–1929* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 119.
57. The classic comparative reference is, of course, Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).
58. Antonio Gramsci, *La costruzione del partito comunista: 1923–1926* (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), 486.

